

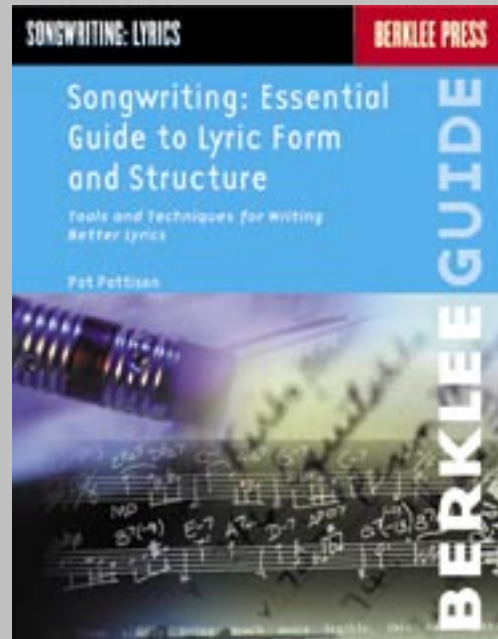
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**Songwriting: Essential Guide to  
Lyric Form and Structure**  
Pat Pattison

Introduction  
Lyric Elements: The Great Juggling Act

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# INTRODUCTION

## LYRIC ELEMENTS: THE GREAT JUGGLING ACT

BE STILL MY BEATING HEART

It would be better to be cool

It's not time to be open just yet

A lesson just learned is so hard to forget

—Sting, "BE STILL MY BEATING HEART"

You will have no trouble learning about lyric structure. It is simple, just like juggling. When a juggler keeps four balls in the air at once it may seem like magic, but there is no magic involved. The juggler learned by throwing one ball up and catching it, throwing and catching, stopping and starting the motion; always gaining greater control over the movement of the ball. Then came two balls, then three, throwing and catching, stopping and *starring*, with greater and greater control.

As a lyricist, you must learn to juggle four balls.

We will start with one ball, then work slowly and carefully to two, three, and finally four balls. **Start** by looking at the fine verse above by Sting, and answering these questions.

1. How many phrases does it have?
2. How long is each phrase?
3. What is the rhythm of each phrase?
4. How are rhymes arranged?

Any time you write a verse (or any part of a lyric for that matter) you will have to deal with these four lyric elements.

1. How many phrases will I have?
2. How long will each phrase be?
3. What rhythms **will** I use in each phrase?
4. How should I arrange the rhymes?

You usually won't ask the questions before you begin to write, but you will as you write and rewrite. The more control you have over each of these lyric elements, the better you can make them work together to make the lyric go where you want it to go. Stopping and starting, making it move. If you practice enough you will move your words with the ease of a juggler.

# CHAPTER ONE

## NUMBER OF PHRASES: GETTING YOUR BALANCE

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?  
Who speak with their wings and the way that they smile?  
What are the secrets they trace in the sky?  
And why do you tremble each time they ride by?  
-Fagen & Becker "YOUR GOLD TEETH"

The first thing to ask is "What is a phrase?" Phrases are sentences or natural pieces of sentences sometimes called "clauses." Here are some examples of phrases:

Who are these children  
who scheme and run wild  
who speak with their wings  
and the way that they smile  
what are the secrets  
they trace in the sky  
and why do you tremble  
each time they ride by

As you **can** see, when Steely Dan (Donald Fagen & Walter Becker) wrote these lyrics, they wrote in phrases. Each of these lyric phrases also matches a musical phrase. You can see that the shorter phrases can go together easily and naturally to form longer ones.

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?

*Are* the longer or shorter phrases the real ones? They both are. The difference is that sometimes smaller phrases like

who scheme and run wild

depend on being part of something else to sound natural. But they still have an identity of their own, not like:

who scheme and

which is not a phrase at all. It clearly needs something else.

When you write music for lyric phrases, just remember that phrases made of notes are a lot like phrases made of words. Sometimes they are made to be part of something bigger

who scheme and run wild

and sometimes they are made to stand alone.

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?

Even short phrases often stand alone.

Why don't you tickle me?

He shouts.

She bites.

Any book on English Grammar has more than enough to say about phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is enough here to look at a few examples. For convenience, call them all "phrases."  
Prepositional phrases:

After the rain, the birds sang madly.

Starships exploded *over* the shoulder of **Orion**.

Verbal Phrases:

Soaring on paper wings is risky business. (Gerund)

Barely cracking a smile, he bowed. (Participle)

The next phrases contain both a subject and a verb, but still depend on being part of something bigger. **Can** you see why?

Adjective phrases (modify nouns):

She longed for someone who would serve her forever.

Adverb phrases (modify verbs):

When the fog lifted, she turned for home.

Noun phrases (used as subject, predicate, or object):

What you see is a broken man. (Subject)

Sex is not what *it* is cracked up to **be**. (Predicate)

Hit the dealers where *it* hurts the most. (Object)

Each of the phrases has a word that connects it to a part of the main sentence. (Words like "who, what, when where, why, that.") These words turn the phrases into dependents rather than self-reliant individuals.

When you talk, you do not need a book on English Grammar. Talking comes naturally. A good little book on grammar might be a handy **thing** to have around. Not that you have to write proper sentences. Sometimes just for information.

EXERCISE 1: TRY DIVIDING THIS PARAGRAPH FROM HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S "THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS" INTO PHRASES. USE A SLASH (/) BETWEEN PHRASES TO SHOW WHERE THE DIVISIONS ARE. I WILL DO THE FIRST FEW TO GET YOU STARTED.

"I took up the chip / on which the three I have described were struggling, / carried it / **f**into my house, / and placed it under a tumbler on my window sill in order to see the issue. Holding a microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw that, though he was assiduously gnawing at the near fore leg of his enemy, having severed his remaining feeler, his own breast was all tom away, exposing what vitals he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate was apparently too **thick** for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shown with ferocity such as war only could excite.

## LYRIC PHRASES/MUSICAL PHRASES

Like a happily married couple, lyric phrases and musical phrases should match. Putting them out of sync with each other usually ends up in disaster.

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